

Center for American Progress Action Fund



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Thank you, Chairman Hunter and Ranking Member Kildee, for inviting me to testify on the value of alternative teacher certification programs. My name is Cynthia Brown, Vice President for Education Policy at the Center for American Progress Action Fund.

Teacher effectiveness is critical to the success of education reform efforts, which is why forward-thinking leaders are focused on reforming teacher certification. Adding urgency to the effort is a growing consensus that the supply of new teachers isn't meeting the demand, particularly for subject shortage areas and hard-to-staff schools. Alternative certification programs are a promising strategy for addressing that necessity. Yet, to realize the benefits of these programs, we need to institute policies that ensure the programs are high-quality, innovative, and effective. To be sure, the same needs are true for traditional teacher preparation. The overwhelming majority of teachers continue to be trained by traditional programs, which must also be reformed.¹ Until our country becomes far more selective in recruiting, training, and retaining top-tier teachers, student achievement will continue to lag.

I want to make three key points in my testimony today—

1. Teacher policy must focus on teacher effectiveness more than on qualifications, which frees us from some of the unproductive debates around alternative certification.
2. High-quality alternative certification is a promising strategy for increasing the supply of effective teachers, and much can be done to promote higher quality.
3. Federal and state policies should be put in place to expand the pipeline of talented teachers through robust alternative certification and traditional preparation programs.

To that end, I would recommend that Congress focus on three main policy levers to improve the supply of effective teachers—

1. Revise the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to focus on teacher effectiveness through the use of comprehensive evaluation systems.
2. Fund the development and expansion of high-quality alternative certification programs, similar to the way Congress funds high-quality charter schools.
3. Increase accountability for all teacher training programs—alternative and traditional—so that outcomes improve and limited resources are spent wisely.

I would now like to expand on each of these points.

Teacher policy must focus on teacher effectiveness more than on qualifications. For too long our nation has assumed that teachers who obtain state certification are fit to teach, and that most would eventually excel in the classroom after gaining some experience. But research proved us wrong. Inputs and credentials like certification, licensure, master's degrees, experience, or teacher preparation coursework are not solid predictors of how well teachers will help students learn.² Some inputs like subject matter knowledge do matter, especially in the upper grades.³ But it is time for policymakers to stop relying wholly on proxies and to start insisting that states and school districts use outputs—direct measures of effectiveness—to assess teacher performance and improve teaching and learning.

Pioneering states have begun to do this. In 2011, 26 states used student achievement measures as part of their evaluation systems.⁴ When combined with other evidence of effective teaching, states are beginning to develop fair, comprehensive, and reliable systems of evaluation.

This is the right move to make, and federal policy should follow suit. It is fine to set a minimum bar to enter the classroom, such as requiring a college degree, subject matter competency, and some form of training.⁵ But we should not pretend that this is a ceiling. It is a floor. If we focus on teacher effectiveness, that will free us from some of the interminable debates on the best route to preparing and certifying teachers. What matters most is how well teachers do in the classroom, not how they arrived there.

High-quality alternative certification is a promising strategy for increasing the supply of effective teachers for high-need schools, subjects, and areas. The overwhelming majority of teacher graduates (79 percent in 2010⁶) take a traditional path into teaching. That means they graduate from college, take a specified set of education courses, complete a practice teaching component, and pass an exam in order to obtain a certificate. Some states require them to earn an advanced certificate once they have taught for several years.

Alternative certification, by contrast, generally targets applicants who already have an undergraduate degree but need education coursework to meet state certification requirements. So alternative certification programs streamline or condense those requirements. For example, they may require shorter but more intensive practice teaching assignments or more targeted, practical coursework. And usually teachers in alternative certification programs assume duties in a classroom while they complete their program. However, they like all other teachers, earn certification. They just do it in a different way.⁷

The first alternative certification programs began in the early 1980s, the most notable of which was the New Jersey Provisional Teacher Program begun in 1985.⁸ In 2010 (the most recent year with available data), 45 states plus DC approved some type of alternate route, and 21 percent of teacher graduates came from an alternative certification program.⁹ Alternate routes have often been used to recruit candidates that would otherwise not enter teaching—candidates who are older and/or have knowledge of hard-to-staff subjects like math or science—and to recruit teachers for working in high-need schools and areas. Some programs, like the New York City Teaching Fellows, were created to replace teachers who had emergency credentials.¹⁰

Research shows that graduates of alternative certification programs, on average, perform at the same level as traditionally prepared teachers who work in similar schools.¹¹ There are some low-performing alternate routes for sure, and there are some that outshine traditional programs. But on average, teachers perform about the same. So, it is important to remember that the goal of alternate routes is to increase the supply of teachers by drawing from a different, sometimes larger pool of candidates than the traditional brick-and-mortar university. And evidence shows that many alternatively certified teachers do work in high-need schools or subjects.¹² Thus, as long as the programs are high-quality, they are legitimate and worthwhile approaches to improving teacher supply.

Several policies could be put in place to expand the pipeline of talented teachers through robust alternative certification programs. Policymakers at the federal and state level should keep several things in mind as they take steps to improve the effectiveness of alternative certification programs—

1. **Minimize the burden placed on program participants.** States should ensure that alternative certification programs are affordable to a wide range of nontraditional candidates by strategically requiring only coursework and learning experiences that are essential. States can do this by defining what competencies teachers must obtain, rather than credit hours they must earn. The best programs select candidates who have already mastered their content area and only need training in teaching methods, and they minimize burden to entry in order to attract the largest possible pool.¹³
2. **Ensure alternative certification programs are high-quality.** Given the unevenness in quality and content of alternative certification programs¹⁴, several things could be done to strengthen their quality and rigor—

Be selective in recruitment. Across the board, the bar to entry is far too low. The best programs require a high minimum GPA and strong subject matter knowledge to participate. Relatedly, states should set higher cut scores for passing licensure or certification exams. Current pass rates on state certification exams are almost 100 percent and tell us little about how teachers will perform in the classroom.¹⁵

Frequently assess. Teacher candidates currently get infrequent feedback on their progress. Alternative certification could be strengthened by ensuring trainees get frequent, diagnostic, performance-based feedback throughout their training and into their first years of teaching. 25 states and 180 preparation programs have joined the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) Consortium, which has created a subject-specific, performance-based assessment for pre-service teacher candidates, centered on student learning.¹⁶ A reliable, valid system of performance assessments based on common standards would provide consistency in measuring teacher effectiveness, track teacher progress, flag areas of need, and create a continuum of performance throughout a teacher's career.¹⁷ It would also provide rich information for improving preparation programs and holding them more accountable.

Provide mentoring and induction. Many new teachers are left to sink or swim once in the classroom. Alternatively certified teachers with shortened or condensed training could benefit even more from high-quality induction programs that have been

shown to improve retention, teaching practice, and student achievement.¹⁸ A 2007 study by the New Teacher Center also found that every \$1.00 invested in induction yields \$1.66 in returns.¹⁹

Strengthen accountability. Programs should be judged by the performance of their graduates, not on their path to get teachers into schools. States could enhance alternative route programs substantially by creating and using robust data systems that measure teacher effectiveness, as well as retention rates, where teachers are placed, and feedback from districts and schools on how well the candidates perform.²⁰ States could then use that data to inform the improvement, reward, or closure of alternative certification programs. Feedback data will help ensure that alternative certification programs are meeting the needs of the schools that hire them.

3. **Invest in innovation and growth.** Alternative certification programs are sometimes stifled by political opposition, limited resources, or fallout from poor results. To encourage innovation and growth, policymakers can take several steps—

Strengthen accountability. As I just mentioned, policymakers would be wise to focus limited resources on programs that work and close those programs that do not.

Allow multiple providers of preparation and certification. Restricting preparation and certification to universities and states artificially constricts the teacher pipeline. Nonprofits, charter schools, and school districts can and should be providers as long as they produce effective candidates.

Invest in high-quality programs. States and the federal government should identify and expand effective programs. At the same time, they should invest in promising programs and require them to demonstrate results to receive continued funding.

As Members of Congress I know you are, of course, interested in what the federal government specifically can do to promote teacher effectiveness. CAPAF recommends that Congress take the following steps to improve teacher training overall, both for traditional and alternative preparation programs—

1. **Revise the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to focus on teacher effectiveness, more than on teacher qualifications.** We cannot know how well our preparation programs train teachers if we do not know how teachers perform in the classroom. Thus, Congress should require states to adopt comprehensive evaluation systems as a condition of receiving Title II funds. Title II is ripe for an overhaul. The current program, which funds teacher and principal training, is a grab bag of allowable uses that have not proven effective. Most states and districts spend this money on professional development and class-size reduction that have not shown substantial results.²¹

Evaluation systems should measure and improve the impact teachers make on student learning. Performance should be measured in multiple, objective, and valid ways that at least include measures of student achievement, classroom observations, and student feedback. Title II funds could then be used to tighten up professional development based on the results of evaluations. Groundbreaking work by the Gates Foundation's Measures

of Effective Teaching Project has involved over 3,000 teachers in seven large districts.²² The project has shown how observations and feedback can accurately identify quality teaching and can be used alongside measures of student learning. We as a nation must shift the conversation toward measuring, rewarding, and improving teacher effectiveness, more than their qualifications, both during and after teacher training.

2. **Fund the development and expansion of high-quality alternative certification programs, similar to the way Congress funds high-quality charter schools.** There is a shortage of high-quality teacher candidates for our country's high-need schools. Thus, Congress should authorize competitive state grants for increasing high-quality alternative certification programs, conditioned on the implementation of policies that ensure quality. Congress does something similar now with the Replication and Expansion grants in the Charter School Program. The Replication and Expansion grants have funded 250 new high-quality charter schools in 17 states in just two years.²³ Congress could provide similar competitive grants to fund high-quality alternative certification programs. The program could take a tiered-funding approach similar to the Investing in Innovation Fund. That is, programs showing the greatest evidence would receive larger amounts of funding to support expansion, while those with less evidence but showing promise would receive less funding for start-up purposes. Low-performing programs would lose funding. Using a pay-for-success approach, some programs might receive small initial funding that would only continue or grow as programs demonstrate success. This would help ensure that limited federal resources are spent wisely.
3. **Increase accountability for all teacher training programs—alternative and traditional.** Current accountability for teacher training is woefully inadequate. Rarely do programs measure the impact of their graduates on student learning (only 28 states do so), where graduates teach, or how long they remain. The most common criteria programs use are inputs with little or no correlation to outcomes—like accreditation status, pass rates on notoriously weak certification exams, or program completion rates. Some programs even use criteria like student-faculty ratios, minimum hours devoted to student teaching, or adherence to state reporting requirements.²⁴ These are hardly outcomes-based indicators that measure the effectiveness of preparation programs.

Thus, Congress should require states to measure the effectiveness of teachers, link the data to training programs, and use the information to reward, improve, or shut down teacher preparation programs, regardless of their route. We believe effectiveness data should include impact on student achievement, persistence rates for up to 5 years, and feedback surveys from teachers and their employers (i.e., school districts). This requires robust data systems that include information from state education, labor department (or state insurance department), university, and school district data systems.²⁵ But measuring and reporting data is only one step. Acting on that data is the next step. States should annually identify and reward high-performing programs, provide guidance for improving low-performing programs, and eventually close chronically underperforming programs. In order to be fair and rigorous, such accountability should apply to all training programs in the state, including traditional and alternative programs.

There is leverage to accomplish this. Currently the Higher Education Act (HEA) requires states to assess the performance of teacher preparation programs and to identify and assist low-performing programs. But unfortunately, only 38 states identified low-performing programs in 2010, the most recent year with available data. Out of over 2,000 programs nationwide, a mere 38 (or less than 2 percent) were flagged as low-performing or at-risk of being low-performing. Fifteen were located in Texas alone.²⁶ The upcoming reauthorization of both ESEA and HEA will be ripe opportunities to strengthen accountability for teacher training.

Our current teacher policies at all levels—federal, state, and local—are inadequate for the demands we are placing on schools. We must improve the supply and effectiveness of teachers if we are to raise standards, turn around low-performing schools, increase innovation, and remain internationally competitive. High-quality alternative certification programs are a promising strategy to help improve the supply of teachers. With smart reforms and targeted investment they can be expanded to increase the pool of talented teachers. But they must also be accompanied by overall reforms to traditional preparation and state and district policies that impact hiring and placement, evaluation, career advancement, professional development, and personnel decisions.

I thank the Subcommittee for taking on this important issue and focusing attention on improving the teacher pipeline, particularly for our nation's high-need schools and areas.

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Endnotes

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- ¹⁵ 96 percent of teacher candidates graduating from traditional preparation programs passed their certification or licensure exam in the 2008-09 school year, the most recent year of available data. 97 percent of graduates from alternative preparation programs passed their exams in 2008-09. See U.S. Department of Education, “Preparing and Credentialing the Nation’s Teachers.”
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- ²⁴ U.S. Department of Education, “Preparing and Credentialing the Nation’s Teachers.”
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